

Muslims, Middle Easterners, and Stereotypes About Sororities at the
University of Illinois

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It was a humid Thursday afternoon in August, and I can still remember crossing into the Illinois border; from that moment on, I knew my life was going to be different. I grew up in Southern Wisconsin, and had attended the same private school since the sixth grade. I knew it was going to be a challenge to leave Wisconsin and my friends to attend the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Being from out of state, I did not know a single soul there, and it was finally hitting me that I was starting a new chapter in my life. After a four hour long drive that seemed to take forever, I had arrived at the place where I would call home for the next four years. That day, I moved into room 320 in Weston Hall, and after settling in, I remember hearing all the girls talking about “Rush.” I had no idea what it was or why it was such a big deal, but I soon learned that it was one of the biggest events at the University of Illinois. In reality, Rush was a slang term for formal recruitment to join a Sorority. All of the girls were talking about it, so I decided to sign up for recruitment as well: I had no friends, no sense of direction, and really wanted to be a part of campus life. It was that day that soon changed my college life forever. I had no idea what was next for me, and I had absolutely no idea that it was going to be one of the best decisions of my life. Being of Persian descent, I was a little curious about how that would play a role for me while going through the Recruitment process. After Recruitment, Bid day, and initiation, I researched and learned even more about the Greek System and its stereotypes with certain ethnicities, races, and religion.

There are many universities across the United States that are ranked high in academics, have a Greek system, and are home to thousands of young college students. This is the typical American college experience for most students; yet, not many can say

that they attend the ninth ranked public university in the country, have the largest Greek system in the entire world, and are home to roughly 42,000 students, which is the University of Illinois at Urbana- Champaign (U.S and World Report). The University of Illinois is a much different place than most colleges, and the main differences revolve around the Greek System. The University of Illinois has the largest Greek system, not only in the country, but in the world. It is comprised of nineteen sororities on the Black Greek Council, Interfraternity Council, Panhellenic Council, and United Greek Council. The Black Greek Council consists of twelve predominantly African American sororities and fraternities, the Interfraternity has 47 fraternities, Panhellenic Council has 25 different sororities, and there are 14 sororities and fraternities in the United Greek System. Illinois is home to a total of 35 sororities and 67 fraternities on campus (*Chapter Communications*). There are many stereotypes that people believe about Sororities; many see them as meant only for ‘white girls’ who like to ‘party and drink;’ however, Sororities are actually meant to bring diversity, philanthropy, and scholarship into campus life. Thus, anyone may join a Sorority regardless of religion, nationality, ethnicity, ability, and sexual orientation. Anyone may participate in the formal Recruitment process, and each year, there are over 1,000 girls that go through Recruitment at the University of Illinois. There are absolutely no requirements, rules, or regulations that could make a person ineligible for joining the Greek system at the University of Illinois. I started thinking back to my own Recruitment experience, and the weeks that it took to find the right fit for myself. I recall that no one at any point asked any intrusive or personal questions regarding my back round, heritage, religious beliefs, or sexual preferences. The houses were more interesting in knowing who I am as a person, what I staying in school, and how I am involved on campus. This made

me feel very comfortable and welcomed to the Greek system at the University of Illinois.

Of course I looked and dressed like the majority of the girls participating in Recruitment but maybe if I was wearing the hijab it might make me feel like an outsider and different from the other girls, that are going through the process of Recruitment. This may be the exact reason why a Muslim girl would not want to join a Sorority.

To obtain the best information on this topic, I interviewed a Muslim, Middle Easterners, and the personal relations manager for the largest Sorority council at the University of Illinois. Due to EUI protocols for IUB, the subjects for my study were University students and one is a member of the Panhellenic faculty. I asked my interviewees very broad questions about the Greek life at Illinois. My first interview was with a Middle Eastern girl, who is 100% Iranian, and has thought about joining a Sorority, yet she is hesitant because she feels as if "it is a white girls world". I asked 'Neda' many questions on what she feels about Sorority life in general. She was a little hesitant on her answers because she still did not know if she was going to go through recruitment next year. I then asked "'how do you feel about sororities on campus? Do you feel that they are only subjective to white girls and no other ethnicities or races?' she replied with

Sororities? I don't think they are specifically tailored to white girls, but I don't think that they have as many minorities involved. In PAR (Pennsylvania Avenue Residents Halls) there are so many different ethnicities and so much diversity everywhere you look. I feel like since Sororities don't have many well-known minorities they don't represent them as much.

This point is completely true, because no one can know exactly how many people will go through recruitment, and how many are from certain ethnicities, races, or religions. Yet, when someone moves into a dorm, like 'Neda' said, or into University housing all of that

information is public and the University will know exactly how to disperse people so every dormitory is diverse.

‘Neda’ seemed hesitant, and uptight, and it seemed as if she was not sure that she wanted to open up about her opinions on Sorority life in general. What I could tell from her answer was that she did not think Sororities were nearly as diverse as they could potentially be. Also, her Middle Eastern background could be a major deciding factor for her decision to join. Since she already believes that Sororities do not have as many minorities as some University Housing may have, that might make her feel like she could be ostracized if she did decide to join a Sorority.

Next, I interviewed a senior who has been in a Sorority since her freshmen year. She was a much more open and knowledgeable person and therefore easier to talk to. Also, because she has been in a Sorority for the past four years, she has a wide breadth of knowledge on the subject. My interview with ‘Analia’ went very well, I began with simple questions that only someone who is in a Sorority would know how to answer. “Did you ever feel like you were judged during the Panhellenic Rush because of your ethnicity?” Her reply was, "No. Because I think a lot of houses looked at it as a positive thing to have girls that bring diversity to their house.” ‘Analia’ sees that if a girl goes through recruitment who is from a different ethnicity, race, or religion, many houses will want her and view it as a positive thing, because she will bring the diversity that is wanted into that Sorority house. Because this statement came from someone who is a minority in the Greek system, it shows that in general minorities might not be excluded from the Greek system if they simply gave it a chance.

My next interview was probably the most informative out of them all. I spoke with the head of personal relations from the Panhellenic Council. I decided to interview someone from the Panhellenic Council because it is the largest of all of the Sorority councils on campus, with 25 of the 35 Sororities on campus in Panhellenic council. She was very nice and was glad to help me with my paper. For example, I asked, ““what are the most important values and or goals that the Panhellenic council has for the sororities to strive for (Example Philanthropy, scholarship, social, diversity, community etc)?” She replied with

Our mission statement outlines our values, which are friendship, leadership, scholarship, service, social advancement and diversity. With the current Panhellenic Pride Initiative we are asking each Sorority to choose three of these values and give an outlined plan of how they will work to improve them throughout this year.

This point of view was especially crucial to my research because I can not just base my research off of what the girls say and think about the other members, because that may not be true, and I needed to know the real facts about recruitment and Greek life. Next I asked a very important question that I thought would be informative for the Muslim girls and their unique point of view, “Do you feel as if a Muslim girl in a Hijab (a Muslim head scarf) would be treated fairly, with respect, as well as have the same opportunity as being picked for a house as a white girl who has blue eyes and blonde hair?”

Every Sorority on campus is diverse and has women of all ethnicities and I do not think that a Muslim woman wearing a Hijab would be viewed or treated any differently. Since one of our main values is diversity we often stress the importance of accepting people of all religions, races, sexual orientations etc.

This point truly shows how a girl wearing a hijab could potentially be viewed if she wanted to go through the formal recruitment process. On the other hand, after an interview with a Muslim girl who attends the University of Illinois, she explained that perhaps one doesn't find a Muslim girl in a Sorority because she might not feel as if it encompasses her moral beliefs, and that it might be difficult to be active in the chapter as well as to be able to still practice her faith. I asked, "Do you feel as if a Muslim or Middle Eastern girl could join a Sorority?" She replied, "my sister was in one, and I feel like they could, but you can't participate in a lot of stuff and you won't be partying in the same ways. But there is a lot more to partying, and it really depends on the individual." Many feel as if partying and drinking are what most sororities are associated with, yet, what is so amazing is that people do not see what the Panhellenic council personal relations had said. When someone says 'Sorority' they should think about friendship, scholarship, philanthropy, and diversity, not drinking. I asked one of my interviewees about how she thought girls who didn't drink could fit in. She replied with...

"Yeah. I do. Honestly anyone can drink. Already here all of my friends drink, and I don't.

So I don't think that would make a difference from just being in a Sorority."

So while many believe those who are involved in Greek Life drink, there are also many who are outside of Greek life that drink. This is another stereotype that is involved with the Greek System, and could potentially be a reason why some Muslims do not want to join a Sorority. While going through my research I found something very astounding that I had not heard of before. There are Sororities all over the country and many of them are actually religiously affiliated. There are Jewish and Christian sororities, and now Islamic Faith based ones too.

Many believed that it could never be done, yet the first ever Islam based Sorority was founded in April 2005 in North Carolina. Imani Abdul-Haqq who was an active member in her University's Muslim Student Association on campus and decided that she did not have to entirely give up on Sororities, but rather she found herself the new founder of the first Muslim Sorority ever.

With the help of her mom, who used to be the President of Bennett College and who was also a member of a Sorority, Delta Sigma Theta, she was able to help form the first Islamic faith based Sorority called Gamma Gamma Chi.

The Sorority is based on Islam, yet non-Muslims are encouraged to join Gamma Gamma Chi just as much as practicing Muslims are. Some of the things that the girls do in Gama Gamma Chi are pray-together daily, fast together during Ramadan, and enjoy themselves with being active members in their student body. One is not required to wear the Hijab, but one is always welcome to. "Striving for the pleasing of Allah through sisterhood, scholarship, leadership, and community service" is Gamma Gamma Chi's motto. *There is much more to the life of a Muslim than most people know of. Most Muslims abide by the five pillars of Islam, which are the submission to God who is the only God, Allah. When a person says the sentence 'there is no God, but God and Muhammad is his messenger, that is what makes one a Muslim. This is known as creed, or in Arabic, Shahadah. Prayers, or Salat, Muslims are suppose to pray five times a day, before dawn, at midday, mid afternoon, sunset, and nighttime. Swam or Fasting during Ramadan is a vital part of being a Muslim because this discipline oneself, to have understanding and empathy for the hungry. Charity to the poor, also called Zakat, is seen as the most important of the five pillars mainly because Muhammad was bothered*

by such things like “injustice, inequality, and poverty, and the demand that people give to the poor was a part of his overall vision of a more justice society” (Molloy 434). Muslims try to donate a certain percentage of their yearly income or on all of ones belongings and they give this to the poor. The last Pillar is Hajj, meaning ones pilgrimage to Mecca. This pilgrimage is to be done at least once in ones lifetime; yet, it is acceptable if one cannot travel to Mecca, due to illness and/or financial hardship. The five pillars seem easy enough to follow while being a student living in the states, yet there is much more that a Muslim has to do. A Muslim woman should not engage in relationships with men before marriage, she should cover her hair, respect her family, just to name a few. These are some of the issues that may get in the way for Muslim girls trying to join the Greek system.

Gamma Gamma Chi raises organization raises money just like other Sororities do across the country for charities. Their also plans social events, but without the alcohol and the attendance of men, and they also hosts discussions about their faith, culture, and Islam in general. Gamma Gamma Chi did such a great job with forming the first chapter of Gamma Gamma Chi, that by the end of 2008 they had a total of six new chapters. (East Carolina University). The cities and states include: National Grand Chapter - Alexandria, Virginia, Alpha Chapter - Atlanta, Georgia, Beta Chapter - DC Metro Area, Delta Chapter - Chicago, Illinois, Epsilon Chapter – Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and Gamma Chapter - Greensboro, North Carolina.

Since there were Christian faith based Sororities, her University decided that this was a great step in the path towards bringing more diversity to Greek life in general. I believe that if the Students at the University of Illinois wanted to have a Muslim Sorority, the Gamma Gamma Chi chapter would be happy to bring a division to the largest Greek Life School. This means that the University would be able to and have many more students involved with campus life and more specifically Greek Life. Those who believed that they could not participate in Greek life due to religious obligations can now participate because of new chapters like Gamma Gamma Chi (Islamic Sorority: Gamma Gamma Chi."). After reading this to one of my interviewees, I asked her 'Lina' "How do you feel about having a Sorority that doesn't involve drinking" she responded with "I think it's great! Its awesome for the girls who can be a part of everything and then they don't have to pick and choose the activities. They will be able to enjoy everything." This explanation was the very motivation that the girls had to first begin their Islamic Faith based chapter. They wanted to be involved on campus and Greek Life, but not have to feel as if they would be compromising their beliefs. Because my interviewee does not drink, I wanted to ask her what she thought about this Sorority because it matters to those who follow religious guidelines, not to those who do not follow the guidelines. Her response was very encouraging because it means that although some girls may feel as though they cannot join some Sororities because of their cultures, it does not preclude them from being involved in Greek Life in general.

Therefore, through my research I have come to the conclusion that Greek Life is not set for any one ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, and religion. It is for all. It involves integrity, trust, and diversity because there is no set type of person that fits Greek life. It can fit any person, and any religious affiliation. I truly hope that the University of Illinois will be able to add a chapter of Gamma Gamma Chi so they could be the first Islamic affiliated Sorority on our University's campus.

There are also many interesting facts and statistics that many people do not know when it comes to Greek life. Some of them include: There are over 800 campuses in the United States and Canada that participate in Greek Life, there are over 9,000,000 Greek members nationally, 63 percent of the U.S. President's cabinet since the year 1900 have been Greek, 85% of the Fortune 500 executives belong to a fraternity, 76% of all Congressmen and Senators belong to a fraternity, and 40 of 47 U.S. Supreme Court Justices since the year 1910 were fraternity men. Over \$7 million is raised each year by Greeks nationally, and 850,000 hours of service are volunteered by Greeks annually; 45 percent of Greek students say that they are more accepting of individual differences since joining a fraternity or Sorority. Lastly a U.S Government study shows that over 70 percent of all those who join a fraternity or Sorority graduate, while under 50% of all non-fraternity/Sorority persons graduate. These statistic's and facts show how important Greek life is to so many people, and truly how many people are involved (Greek Speak).

All in all, one may want to always follow their beliefs and moral values because it is what is most valuable in this world. Religion is something that no one can take away from you. Your beliefs make you an individual, and this is why it truly is a huge factor in people's lives. Muhammad Iqbal, a philosopher and a poet who was extremely immersed in the Islamic faith had a quote that shows what faith means to Muslims, "If faith is lost, there is no security and there is no life for him who does not adhere to religion" (ThinkExist.com). This explains how faith is extremely vital to some, and this is why I came to the understanding of why many Muslims girls do not feel as if they would be able to keep up with their moral obligations if they join a Sorority, yet I still feel as if they could because scholarship, philanthropy and diversity are the three main figures for the Greek Councils. I truly hope that one day the University of Illinois will be able to have an Islamic Based Sorority chapter, to go along with the two Jewish Sororities on this campus.

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